

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Feeling Moral Obligation and Living in an Organic Unity: Virginia Woolf's response to G. E. Moore

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Introduction – Climbing the Cathedral Spire

There is an abundance of scholarly work on the topic of Virginia Woolf's writings and philosophy. One popular trend uses the theoretical framework of continental philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Nietzsche, and Montaigne, amongst others, and argues that Woolf's works are literary embodiments or instantiations of their concepts, methods, or even entire philosophies.¹ Another trend repudiates any connection between Woolf's literature and philosophy altogether, denying that the latter can provide any insight into the former.² This denial seems reasonable, for Woolf wrote in times when traditionally accepted answers to amaranthine philosophical questions were vehemently doubted. Lackey calls this phase in the intellectual history of European thought 'modernist anti-philosophicalism.'³ Modernist anti-philosophicalism can more appropriately be called modernist anti-metaphysicalism, for it was primarily a critique of the metaphysical dogma propounded throughout the history of Western philosophy – from Plato up to Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes and Kant.⁴ Much of significance is the fact that British philosopher G.E. Moore, a contemporary of Woolf, was a pioneering proponent of anti-metaphysicalism,⁵ and interestingly, we know that Woolf engaged with his magnum opus – *Principia Ethica* (1903).⁶ Despite the proliferation of secondary literature on Woolf's writings and philosophy, an exposition of the precise influence of Moore's thought on Woolf's writing is curiously lacking. Indeed, reducing her writings to literary articulations of what other philosophers have said, as has been the popular trend, denies her any philosophical merit in her own right. When Woolf writes, 'I am climbing Moore like some industrious insect determined to build a nest on the top of a

¹ Suzette A. Henke, 'Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading,' *Neophilologus* 73 (1989) 461-72; Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1993); A.O. Frank, *The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf: A Philosophical Reading of the Mature Novels* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001); Benjamin D. Carson, 'Darkness Beyond the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf, Charles Baudelaire and Literary Modernism,' *Nebula* 2.3 (2003) 18-34; Heidi Strol, 'Heidegger in Woolf's clothing,' *Philosophy and Literature* 32 (2008) 303-14; Jason Wakefield, 'Mrs Dalloway's Existential Temporality,' *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 9 (2013) 60-7.

² Michael Lackey, 'Modernist Anti-Philosophicalism and Virginia Woolf's Critique of Philosophy,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 29 (2006) 76-98; Erwin R. Steinberg, 'G. E. Moore's Table and Chair in "To the Lighthouse,"' *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (1988) 161-8.

³ Lackey 77.

⁴ Lackey 77-80. For a comprehensive history of metaphysics in the early and late modern periods see A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Thomas Baldwin, *G.E. Moore: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 2-61; Ernest Sosa, 'G.E. Moore (1873-1958),' *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy* ed. A.P. Martinich and E. David Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 45-56.

⁶ S. P. Rosenbaum, 'Virginia Woolf among the Apostles,' *Le Tour Critique* 2 (2013), 10 July 2015 <http://letourcritique.u-paris10.fr/index.php/letourcritique/article/view/27/html>; S. P. Rosenbaum, *Georgian Bloomsbury: An Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (Toronto: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); S. P. Rosenbaum, 'Preface to a Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group,' *New Literary History* 12 (1981) 329-44.

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Cathedral spire,'⁷ it is up to the critic to explicate the precise nature of this climb, as I attempt to do in this paper.

I begin with a brief exposition of Moore's notion of 'the good' as experiencing moral obligation within an organic community. In doing so, I highlight a crucial loophole within his conceptual framework – he does not theorise the conditions for the possibility of experiencing moral obligation, and therefore renders 'the good' ultimately ineffective in taking moral decisions. In the second section, I read Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as conceptualising precisely the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation missing in Moore's framework, in explicitly epistemological terms – the ability to experience what Martin Stelf calls 'states of heightened perceptive intensity.'⁸ Furthermore, I argue that Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysicalist and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore's ethical theory by articulating a 'new materialism.'⁹ Her crucial philosophical intervention lies in conceptualising this new materialism as at once logically continuous with Moore's realism and critical of the subject-object dichotomy he upholds.

G. E. Moore's Ethics - Moral Obligation and Moral Excess

In *Principia Ethica*, Moore regards 'the good' as the most fundamental ethical concept.¹⁰ He does not however use the good as an adjective or an attribute, as in good person or good car where the standard of evaluating 'goodness' is the object it is attributed of. It is precisely such an account of goodness essential to ethical naturalism that Moore is attempting to avoid in his own ethical theory.¹¹ Ethical naturalism as James Rachels defines it is the idea that 'moral properties (such as goodness and rightness) are identical with "natural" properties, that is, properties that figure into scientific descriptions or explanations of things.'¹² Moore's main criticism of ethical naturalism is that it involves commitment to the 'naturalistic fallacy' (PE 111) – a fallacy that he claims to have infected 'almost every book on ethics' (PE 62). Of particular interest is the crucial aspect of this fallacy, amongst others, of confusing a non-natural property (what Rachels calls moral properties) for a natural property (PE 91).

Moore takes natural properties like colour to be constituent parts of wholes, such that without the parts, the wholes are rendered 'contentless' (PE 66). He writes about the good, contrasting it with natural properties:

it is immediately obvious that when we see a thing to be good, its goodness is not a property which we can take up in our hands, or separate from it even by the most delicate scientific instruments, and transfer to something else. It is not, in fact, like most of the predicates which we ascribe to things, a part of the thing to which we ascribe it. (PE 124)

In arguing thus, Moore seems to tacitly assume that ethical naturalism amounts to reducing ethics only to the natural sciences. Ethical naturalism could in principle involve reducing goodness to a

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* ed. N. Nicholson (London: Hogarth, 1975) 340.

⁸ Martin Stelf, "'A Very Remarkable Piece of Iron': Towards a theory of Material Imagination in Virginia Woolf's 'Solid Objects,'" *Prague Journal of English Studies* 3 (2014) 19.

⁹ Stelf 20.

¹⁰ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* ed. Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 57. (Hereafter PE)

¹¹ Baldwin 6. For a detailed discussion of Moore's ethical theory see also Hutchinson Brian, *G.E. Moore's Ethical Theory: Resistance and Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² James Rachels, *The Blackwell Guide of Ethical Theory* ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 75.

value conceptualised in naturalistic terms, like pleasure.¹³ Moore does not however consider this form of ethical naturalism, because his primary concern is to repudiate ethics from the natural sciences. Moore's concern indeed fits neatly within the larger concerns of the modernist world view E.M. Adams talks about in *Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View* – the unconscious longing to define the relationship between the language and methods of science, and the language and experience of values, either in terms of reconciliation or final repudiation.¹⁴ Moore seeks final repudiation, by espousing a conception of the good as devoid of any concrete existence. That is, unlike natural properties, the good is considered to have no existential implications.¹⁵ The important question then is, if the good is not a physical part of a whole the way yellow is part of a yellow object, what enables us to 'see a thing to be good' according to Moore?

We must first inquire into the kind of 'things' Moore considers to be good. Ross interprets the Moorean notion of goodness to be a property of states of affairs.¹⁶ This interpretation captures the essentially social nature of goodness that Moore is concerned with, for a state of affairs would involve a multiplicity of individuals and the relationships between them in particular situations. It does not seem, however, to account for another, perhaps more significant, concern of Moore's – the experienced directness of our moral evaluations which then translate into action. Moore believes that we are all aware of a certain 'simple, indefinable and unanalysable object of thought' (72 PE) by which we mean the term good. He says, 'good is good, and that is the end of the matter' (PE 58). He explains the meaning of simplicity by drawing an analogy between yellow and the good – it is the indivisibility of goodness into other concepts like happiness or pleasure, similar to how the colour yellow cannot be further divided, by way of analysis (PE 59). Simplicity therefore implies indefinability and unanalysability – the good cannot be defined in terms of pleasure, and yellow in terms of blue, for both are wholes in themselves (PE 52).

Here, Warnock highlights a crucial disanalogy that escapes Moore's attention. Yellow can be ostensibly defined, whereas the good cannot, and arguing that the good is in some way ostensibly definable would amount to an obvious naturalistic fallacy.¹⁷ Despite this disanalogy, however, there seems to me to be another fundamental similarity between the good and yellow that Moore is emphasising through the analogy. He asserts that 'just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is' (PE 59). Here, one's inability to explain to another what yellow and good are comes from the fact that the two are epistemologically available only directly – the former through perception of sense data, and the latter through what Baldwin terms 'veridical ethical intuitions.'¹⁸ The difference between these modes of knowing – perceiving and intuiting is, as Nick Zangwill points out, that the former is *aposteriori* whereas the latter is *apriori*. The latter is *apriori*, not in the Cartesian sense of having eternal ideas planted in human minds by God; using contemporary vocabulary, Zangwill interprets Moore's notion of goodness as a modal principle – 'moral

¹³ Baldwin 82.

¹⁴ E. M. Adams, *Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960) viii.

¹⁵ Baldwin 101.

¹⁶ David Ross, *The Right and the Good* ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 91-4.

¹⁷ Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966) 16. For a critical discussion of examples in *Principia Ethica*, see also M.F. Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G.E. Moore,' *Philosophy* 52 (1977) 381-398.

¹⁸ Baldwin 101.

supervenience.’¹⁹ Zangwill argues that moral supervenience ‘is an essential characteristic of moral properties and it is an essential characteristic of our thought about moral properties.’²⁰ We ‘see’ a thing as good in relation with other natural properties of the same thing. The crucial point is that unlike ethical naturalism as Rachels defines it, Moore does not believe that natural and non-natural properties are identical, causally or essentially related.²¹ The latter supervenes the former. Moore’s ingenuity lies in pointing out that despite the relation of supervenience, there is a certain directness with which we epistemologically access both natural and non-natural properties – just as we see a thing as yellow, we ‘see’ a thing as good, and this seeing forms the grounds for our commonsensical inference that the two exist.

Now, given Ross’s interpretation of goodness as a property of states of affairs, we must ask, how would being able to see the good as a property of states of affairs lead to ethical action? In order to account for the strands of utilitarianism articulated in *Principia Ethica*, one would first have to conceptualise humans as moral agents, and not just beings who have certain perceptual abilities, as Ross does in his interpretation. In other words, Ross implies that ‘the good’ is about states of affairs; quite inconsistently with Moore’s objective of theorising what it is to ‘do’ good, the nature of the human self as a moral agent remains unaddressed.

I therefore refrain from using Ross’s interpretation and instead espouse Baldwin’s interpretation of goodness as ‘the concept whose application to states of affairs issues in a specification of what, in a particular situation, one ought to do.’²² Here, the question of human agency (what one ought to do in particular situations) and the social nature of the good (as being applicable not just to individuals but to states of affairs/situations) are accounted for. Furthermore, the directness of moral evaluations is explained anew. One does not merely ‘see’ the good; one ‘applies’ the concept, assuming the former, thereby bridging the gap between seeing or knowing the good and ethical action. The application of the concept takes the form of ‘moral obligation,’²³ argues Baldwin, such that, in doing good one would essentially feel obliged to partake in a creative project – that of creating x state of affairs as against y ‘all things considered,’²⁴ knowing that x will be intrinsically better by itself. Here, the phrase ‘all things considered’ is reflective of Moore’s ideal utilitarianism. It implies, rather ironically, that the value of x state of affairs becomes apparent independent of any other contingencies, including the utility value or consequences that might follow from creating it. Furthermore, feeling obliged to create the good would be preceded by comparative acts of imagination, because a particular state of affairs would become evident as intrinsically better only in relation with other states of affairs. In Moore’s words, a ‘comprehensive comparison of the ordinary judgements of mankind’ will make what creating the good involves evident (PE 137). Hence, as James Fieser puts it, creating an intrinsically better state of affairs would mean doing something ‘morally commendable’²⁵ when there is no logical necessity to do so. That is, it is not logically necessary, but only morally obligatory to create an intrinsically better state of affairs, after the relative moral worth of different states of affairs has been imagined and evaluated.

¹⁹ Nick Zangwill, ‘Moore, Morality, Supervenience, Essence, Epistemology,’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (2005) 126.

²⁰ Zangwill 126.

²¹ Zangwill 127.

²² Baldwin 76.

²³ Baldwin 76.

²⁴ Baldwin 77.

²⁵ James Fieser, ‘Moore, Spencer, and the Naturalistic Fallacy,’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (1993) 274.

Interestingly, Moore considers the relationship between actions and obligation as synthetic (PE 58). That is, what one feels obliged to do can only be inferred from what one actually does. Without such inferences we would be fruitlessly speculating. Conceiving the relationship between moral obligation and ethical action as synthetic leads to nothing but a reinforcement of generally accepted norms. The result of considering all things, turns out to be after all, as Leonard Woolf notes in his autobiography, an uncritical conservatism and therefore thoroughly divorced from politics.²⁶ Moore's argument is indeed an instance of circular reasoning – everyone ought to (feel obliged to) do what everyone does, because everyone does it. It is at this juncture that I would like to elaborate on Moore's notion of 'organic unities' (PE 76), and pursue a new line of critique. Organic unity is the idea that 'the value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts' (PE 79). It follows from this principle that given a particular state of affairs, its value cannot be reduced to the value of its parts, whether the parts are themselves intrinsically good or good only as a means. We must therefore inquire into precisely the excess moral value that cannot be accounted for using the sum of its parts. In evaluating the intrinsic value of different states of affairs, what enables one to experience moral obligation to create a particular state of affairs, over the other, based on their respective moral excesses? In answering this question, we need to explain the conditions for the possibility of feeling moral obligation, given that the value of wholes cannot be reduced to the value of parts. Without having the conceptual grounds for experiencing moral obligation clear, Moore's notion of the good is rendered ineffective, for a comparison between multiple intrinsic values will not be possible. To my mind, the crucial loophole in Moore's notion of the good seems to be the failure to account for what the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation are.

Virginia Woolf's intervention - If only he could see

Far from being able to create or even participate in his familial or social state of affairs, Mr Ramsay feels no moral obligation whatsoever; a compelling sense of moral inertia breeds within him, such that he even fails to acknowledge his actions as having consequences that affect others and his relationship with them – be it his intemperance, his brutish sarcasm, or his tendency to rub things in.²⁷ Mr Ramsay is a metaphysician by profession. His student Charles Tansley considers him 'the greatest metaphysician of the time' (TL 86); Mr Banks tells the reader soon after that 'his last book was not quite his best book' (TL 89). Naturally, Mr Ramsay is fraught with insecurities about his intellectual and personal worth, and in moments of extreme self-deprecation says metaphysics is no different from 'talking nonsense' (TL 97).

The image of a dismal philosopher, and philosophy barely able to subsist as an academic discipline reappears in Woolf's literary oeuvre.²⁸ These depictions alone are insufficient to argue that Woolf partook in the anti-metaphysicalist rebellion, although they are symptomatic of an in-depth and systematic engagement with philosophy. In this section, I take on the task of elaborating on Inglis's assertion that 'Woolf, properly read could help us towards a more balanced view that these two aspects of the novel (the ethical and epistemological) vitally interpenetrate one

²⁶ Leonard Woolf, *Sowing* (London: Hogarth, 1960) 147-149.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New Delhi: UBSPD Pvt Ltd, 2012 [1927]) 38-42. (Hereafter TL)

²⁸ In *Orlando: A Biography*, the protagonist often engages with philosophy – he reads 'Bishop Berkeley's philosophy for the tenth time' (197). Lackey coherently demonstrates how the demise of philosophy from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century is systematically traced in this novel (80-81).

another,²⁹ by reading *To the Lighthouse* as conceptualising precisely the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation lacking in Moore's framework, in explicitly epistemological terms – the ability to experience states of heightened perceptive intensity. Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysicalist and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore's philosophy, by articulating a new materialism, at once continuous with Moore's realism and yet critical of the subject-object dichotomy he upholds.

Mr Ramsay's mental space is invaded by Ps and Qs and Rs. He often speculates,

He reached Q ... But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in distance ... Q he was sure of. Q he could *demonstrate* ... Meanwhile, he was stuck at Q. On, then, on to R. (TL 80-82)

Mr Ramsay believes that speculation about property-less metaphysical universals will yield him the 'immutable, non-relative Truth,'³⁰ a pursuit that presupposes 'an ahistorical and universal thinking faculty that uses logic.'³¹ It is not a coincidence that Mr Ramsay is well versed in the pioneering figures of transcendent empiricism, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and the bastion epoch of 'reason' – the French Revolution (TL 97). Consequent to his preoccupation with the metaphysical, Mr Ramsay is as though 'born blind, deaf and dumb, to the ordinary things' (TL 134). Mrs Ramsay asks herself out of sheer frustration, 'But did he notice the flowers? No. Did he notice the view? No. Did he even notice his own daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef?' (TL 134). Indeed, his perceptual field is scant and narrow, compared to others who inhabit the same spaces.

Mr Banks on the other hand puts everything in his vision to the test of science. Lily shows Mr Banks her painting, and 'he turned – with his glasses raised to the scientific examination of her canvas' (TL 109). She is disappointed at his inability to appreciate, or even approximate comprehending it. Both Mr Ramsay and Banks uphold the subject object dichotomy, by taking for granted the independent existence of their respective objects of perception; the former is concerned with metaphysical objects, the latter with objects of science. It is important to note a fundamental difference between the epistemological consequences of dealing with their respective objects – scientific examination does not block Mr Banks from mundane objects of perception, as Mr Ramsay's metaphysical speculation does. Banks is baffled at the sight of Lily's painting because it is a 'purple shadow with irreverence' (TL 108) that she takes to aesthetically represent Mrs Ramsay. His comprehension, his ability to understand and appreciate a complex piece of art is impaired, while his perceptual abilities, unlike those of Mr Ramsay remain intact.

When Moore claims epistemological significance for our commonsensical belief that the directness of our perception warrants the independent existence of objects we perceive, he is critical of precisely the metaphysical dogma Mr Ramsay is invested in. For Moore, as we saw, a discussion of Ps and Qs devoid of sense data (arising from natural properties) is futile because it disregards how we perceive them. Moore's own intellectual trajectory, beginning with contempt for metaphysical dogma inherent to Kant's transcendental empiricism and Hegel's absolute idealism, to realising the limits of his sense data theory rendered common-sense his theoretical

²⁹ Tony Inglis, 'Virginia Woolf and English Culture,' *Virginia Woolf* ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1992) 58.

³⁰ Lackey 77.

³¹ Lackey 77.

middle ground.³² We also examined Moore's notion of the naturalistic fallacy as problematising the influence of natural sciences in the realm of ethics. While Mr Banks makes value judgements through scientific examination, Moore's attempt is to account for simple non-natural properties such as the good (and beauty), without reducing them to objects of the scientific method. In doing so however – accounting for natural and non-natural properties within the theoretical framework of common-sense (not metaphysics or natural science), Moore upholds the historically cherished subject-object, perceiver-perceived dichotomy; much of his later career was spent in formulating a proof for the existence of the external world as independent of individual perceivers.³³

Woolf shared with Moore the contempt for materialism. In *Modern Fiction*, she makes her anti-materialist/anti-empiricist stance clear by asserting that the materialist writers³⁴ 'write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.'³⁵ The materialist writer is invested in describing the empirically visible, the *seemingly* true and enduring facts, none of which are of Woolf's concern. For Woolf took recourse in the 'dark places of psychology.'³⁶ If nineteenth-century European philosophers like Heidegger, Cassirer, Russell, Carnap, Lukacs and Goldman considered the emerging discipline of psychology as their central point of counter-attack, Woolf readily embraced it giving rise to what Martin Jay calls an 'aesthetic and literary modernism.'³⁷ Stream of consciousness as a method, which captures the fluidity of thought as opposed to the fixity of empirically visible objects, suggests Woolf's anti-materialistic predilections. Her philosophical intervention is however not limited to this much celebrated formal invention. Implicit in *To the Lighthouse* is what Martin Stelf calls Woolf's 'new materialism.'³⁸ Quite unlike Mr Ramsay and Mr Banks, we often find Mrs Ramsay held captive by what she sees. As she knitted a pair of socks or simply sat around, she 'became the thing she looked at' (TL 124) – the ray of light projected by the lighthouse, rhythmically intersecting her field of perception. It is such moments, when the perceiving subject 'literally as well as metaphorically'³⁹ mixes itself with surrounding material objects, that Martin Stelf terms states of heightened perceptive intensity. In the very act of perceiving itself the distinction between the perceiving subject and the perceived object collapses. This collapse is not symptomatic of Woolf's mystic tendencies, as it seems at face value. As Julie Kane argues, tracing Woolf's intellectual relationship with mysticism and theosophy of her times, moments of heightened perceptive intensity articulated in her later works embody Woolf's attempts to capture 'the authenticity of perceptions.'⁴⁰

Woolf's new materialism, if not mystic, does seem antithetical to Moore's philosophy. For the idea of a subject literally blending with an object flies in the face of common sense. Despite this seeming inconsistency, I establish continuity between Moore's realism and Woolf's new materialism. It is very much to Moore's credit that Woolf could articulate her critique of the

³² Baldwin 7-35.

³³ G.E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World,' *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings* ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2013) 147-71.

³⁴ Woolf is referring to Mr Wells, Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* 4 (1984) 159.

³⁶ Woolf, *Fiction* 162.

³⁷ Martin Jay, *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* ed. Mark S. Micale (California: Stanford University Press, 2004) 353.

³⁸ Stelf 20.

³⁹ Stelf 21.

⁴⁰ Julie Kane, 'Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf's,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 41 (1995) 347.

subject-object dichotomy by drawing from him who very much espouses it. Besides reflecting Woolf's systematic philosophical engagement with Moore, this also suggests that the radical potential of a philosophy could very well remain unconscious to the philosopher himself.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the subject-object conflation is not always articulated in literal terms, as in the instance mentioned above. It is more often articulated through Woolf's use of colour in the novel; we must note the visual primacy in Moore's discussion of natural properties through repeated examples of colour. According to Jack Stewart, Woolf's use of colour in *To the Lighthouse* 'forms a psychological spectrum.'⁴¹ Let us briefly examine the notion of a psychological spectrum. Much like the post-impressionist painter, Lily is not limited by boundaries of material objects in aesthetically representing them. When Lily paints 'colours (are) thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; ... random marks scrawled upon the canvas...forc(ing) them to move, flow' (TL 102-103), such that a human portrait looks like a purple shadow. Clearly, Lily does not 'attempt at likeness' (TL 108), and as Stewart remarks 'nothing, in the creative process, is simply one thing.'⁴² The artist's creative process exemplifies fluidity, not only at the level of inner lives, but also at the level of visual sense data.

Sensory fluidity is not entirely absent in Moore's own conceptual framework. We have already seen that Moore expounds a realist pluralism, where in multiple objects are believed to exist in the external world, independent of our awareness of them. Objects (wholes) have natural properties (parts) which Moore believes to have existence in space and moments of time. Moore does not however give us any criterion by which we can affirm an object as necessarily having a part, or a set of parts. That is to say, in Moore's peculiar realism, we have no reason to believe that an apple must be red, or any other colour. The problem, as Baldwin puts it, is that 'too little is considered essential.'⁴³ In consequence, 'there are no constraints on what changes are admissible as changes in an object.'⁴⁴ Woolf builds on the lack of essentialism in Moore's framework, and creates an economy of colours as navigators within the multiple narrative strands in the novel. Specific characters are often associated with particular colours – Mr Ramsay and other male characters are associated with various shades of reds and browns, and Mrs Ramsay and Lily with shades of blues, greens and purples. Colour associations are established through descriptions of backgrounds like the grey-green light (TL 243) and material objects like the reddish brown stockings (TL 75) invoking imaginative responses from the reader; but as we saw with Lily's paintings, there is hardly a clear foreground-background distinction. From the perspective of particular characters, there is an opening of different spaces of perception, such that, as we noted earlier, some characters have relatively scant perceptual fields as compared to others. Mr Ramsay simply cannot see what others do. Andrew rather casually remarks about his father's philosophy, that the crux of the subject-object relationship lies in thinking of a table 'when you are not there' (TL 65). Heidi Strol argues that this remark highlights Andrew's accurate understanding of Mr Ramsay's philosophy as that of a metaphysical traditionalist.⁴⁵ However, given that Mr Ramsay has an otherwise scant perceptual field, and that Andrew is a soldier who has not been described as having any interest in academic philosophy throughout the novel, not to forget his contempt for Tansley's 'point of view' (TL 43), Strol's argument has no force. I suggest instead that Andrew's

⁴¹ Jack Stewart, 'Color in *To the Lighthouse*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 31 (1984) 440.

⁴² Jack Stewart, 'A "Need of Distance and Blue": Space, Color, and Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 46 (2000) 79.

⁴³ Baldwin 48.

⁴⁴ Baldwin 48.

⁴⁵ Strol 308.

remark simply implies that it does not matter whether or not the table is in Mr Ramsay's perceptual field because he does not quite see mundane objects like a table in the first place. Mrs Ramsay and Lily on the other hand perceive a rich world of objects and colours and hence have access to 'aesthetic and imaginative spaces (that) loom large and demand to be filled.'⁴⁶

In order to explain this difference in accessible perceptual fields, we must turn to Woolf's notion of human consciousness, which is, again, continuous with Moore's understanding of the same. According to Moore, consciousness is always an awareness or knowledge of an object that consists of various sense data – Moore uses the phrase 'transparent awareness' (PE 134). In another seminal essay, *The Refutation of Idealism*, Moore explains the transparency of awareness as consciousness 'looking through' something blue and seeing nothing but the blue.⁴⁷ Moore seems to believe that consciousness has blue content by virtue of having sensations of blue objects.⁴⁸ Woolf goes one step ahead of Moore. Consciousness according to Woolf is such that on perceiving an object, not only does transparency of awareness become evident, it expands to encompass the field of objects themselves. That is, through perception, consciousness transcends the individual, and gets defined by the 'ever-widening circle of its own outside.'⁴⁹ The psychological spectrum therefore stretches across humans and impersonal inanimate objects, by way of perception and sensory fluidity.

Here, there is an important shift in how perception is discussed. For Moore, when consciousness is conceptualised as awareness of sense data, the latter is considered as belonging to objects in the external world. For Woolf, however, given that consciousness encompasses that which is perceived, sense data can no longer be considered as belonging to the external world. There is in fact no tenable distinction between the inside and the outside. Sense data for Woolf is central to the process of perception, and not so much a characteristic of the external world as it is for Moore. Mr Ramsay's perceptual field, being scant, suggests therefore that the relative expanse of his consciousness is scant. Despite the fact that he inhabits the same world as Mrs Ramsay, Mr Ramsay's experiences are inevitably perceptually impoverished while Mrs Ramsay's 'range of experience seemed limitless' (TL 123).

Now, we have already seen that non-natural properties, on Zangwill's interpretation of Moore, 'morally supervene' natural properties, such that, when we see a thing as good, we see it in relation with the other natural properties it has. Since Mr Ramsay lives in a perceptually impoverished world, by implication, he also lives in a morally impoverished world. Mr Ramsay does not perceive natural properties that others like Mrs Ramsay perceive, and hence he also does not perceive the non-natural property of moral obligation that she does. Obviously, Mr and Mrs Ramsay see the very same lighthouse. When James expresses his longing to visit the lighthouse despite the rough weather, Mrs Ramsay convinces James that it is unlikely they could go, but not entirely impossible. Mr Ramsay thinks of Mrs Ramsay's hopefulness as 'extraordinary irrationality' (TL 77). She disregarded the facts and 'in effect, told lies' (TL 77). Mrs Ramsay's ability to empathise with an eight year old's mundane desires seems to emerge from the fact that the lighthouse as well as James are encompassed by her individual consciousness. Quite unlike his wife, Mr Ramsay reduces the lighthouse, and perhaps his own son, to another P or Q; his static

⁴⁶ Stewart, *Distance* 84.

⁴⁷ G.E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism,' *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings* ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2013) 37.

⁴⁸ Moore, *Refutation* 36-9.

⁴⁹ Stelf 20.

and opaque consciousness renders him least perceptive when it comes to understanding people, and hence, his uncouth behaviour and perpetual interpersonal crisis.

This brings us to Moore's notion of organic unities. The value of a whole state of affairs, as we saw, is not equivalent to the sum of its parts, according to Moore. Instead of asking how one could calculate the value of a whole, Woolf seems interested in what it means to live in an organic unity. For in times of moral disillusionment, an overwhelming awareness of 'the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best' (TL 93) renders the notion of an organic unity counter-intuitive, if not an impossibility. On the global level, having witnessed the horrors of the First World War and anticipating another of greater intensity, an organic unity can hardly be a given. Since each individual has an overtly indeterminable perceptual expanse, it is her husband's disillusionment with the organic nature of his family and community that Mrs Ramsay struggles with through the novel. Here Mrs Ramsay's own experience of heightened perceptive intensities, which presupposes her consciousness as expanded across a state of affairs becomes relevant as an epistemological precondition to make its organicness evident. Along with the multiple first-person voices simultaneously at work in the novel, and the 'cosmic view from nowhere which both frames and disrupts individual consciousness,'⁵⁰ Mrs Ramsay's extensive consciousness and perceptual field accomplishes the 'reverberation of one solitary experience in another,'⁵¹ thereby forming a grid that unifies the organic unities. Mrs Ramsay, by virtue of having her perceptions 'tangled in a golden mesh' (TL 105), that is, being integrated with the organic unity, also faces the risk of being 'momentarily dazed and blinded' (TL 78) by other members of the unity who continue to live as individuated fragments. She can share and 'transfer' (TL 76) her feelings and experiences across various individuated consciousnesses, and consequently feel moral obligation. If barred from those of others, especially her beloved, she would repent – 'if he only put implicit faith in her' (TL 87): faith in seeing the world the way she did.

Conclusion

My attempt has been to trace the precise influence of Moore's thought on Woolf's writing, as articulated in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. I have argued that Woolf partakes in the anti-metaphysicalist and anti-naturalist rebellion characteristic of Moore's ethical theory; furthermore, she is critical of Moore's framework by conceptualising the conditions for the possibility of moral obligation in explicitly epistemological terms, and articulating a new materialism which is at once continuous with Moore's realism and critical of the subject-object dichotomy he upholds. If indeed we live in a mesh of perceptions and experiences, this paper is a minuscule strand in the larger mesh of Woolf and Moore's literary philosophical works.

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⁵⁰ Lloyd 147.

⁵¹ Lloyd 148.